

We stand in the middle of Rohingya Camp No. 18. It is in the southwest of Kutupalong Rohingya camp cluster in Ukhia upazila of Cox's Bazar district. We are stunned. What used to be green hills months ago are completely devoid of vegetation today and covered with tens of thousands of flimsy shelters made of bamboo, polythene, and tarpaulin of different colours. There is hardly any empty space in the hills occupied by the Rohingya.

The hills in the 5,800 acres of forestland (as of early this year) have not only been stripped off of vegetation—natural or planted—they have been thoroughly downsized. Some have been levelled and many partially cut out for



**Red-eyed Rohingya man carrying roots of trees for cooking.**

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

construction of roads. Red, sandy mud is piled here and there. The temporary shelters have been built on the terraced hills from top to bottom.

The biggest refugee camp in the world today—Kutupalong—has been split into 24 smaller camps and each camp is designated a number. Of the total 32 camps, other eight camps are scattered in Teknaf upazila.

The landscape that was once filled with songs of birds and crickets and roamed around by elephants and a myriad other wild creatures is thoroughly degraded today. Every inch is now occupied by humans. During the daytime, a



**Rohingya men returning to their shelters with firewood they have collected from nearby forest.**

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

low clamour can be heard everywhere and the Muslim call for prayer ring out from the mics of the mosques at intervals.

On May 19 this year, when we stood in the completely ruined forest landscape, we stopped Giasuddin, a young man from Balukhali (a village east of Camp No. 18) to hear how he as a local felt about the abrupt change in his neighbourhood.

"The entire area was jungle with acacia plantation. This is elephant territory," says Giasuddin with confidence. "I have seen tigers, elephants, and other animals in this area. The jungle was there until Rohingya poured in."

Monjur Alam, a 31-year-old-Rohingya of Balukhali camp, agrees with Giasuddin. "When we came here nine months ago, it was all good jungle. I myself cut 10 to 12 trees to make space for my house. I saw an elephant the day I came here. The elephant killed two persons of a family," says Alam. "We used to go to the jungle to collect firewood. But when the rain started, we stopped going there out of fear of elephants and leeches."

When the Rohingya, in the face of genocide in their own country, had begun to come into Bangladesh from August 25, 2017 onwards, everybody was shocked. The Rohingya influx, with nearly 120,000 people crossing the border per week at its peak, was the highest since the Rwandan genocide (according to an estimate by *The Economist*).

The land where the Rohingya camps were built was covered with greenery and was under the jurisdiction of Bangladesh Forest Department (FD). The FD officials tried to prevent the Rohingya from occupying the forestland. They did not anticipate then, the sheer number of people that were yet to come. "We were in the field for little over a week since August 25 to resist. But the Rohingya influx since Eid-day (September 5, 2017) was so great that we gave

environmental costs behind it.

The Forest Department also had to give up land for development of Cox's Bazar town and tourism facilities that the government has been promoting. Meanwhile, the monoculture of foreign species, especially acacia and eucalyptus, has replaced *garjan* forests, creating a man-made disaster on pristine forest land.

Nevertheless, what happened to the forests of Cox's Bazar since the beginning of the current influx has been nothing less than a catastrophe.

Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, the only game reserve of the country up until 2010, is just on the south-western border of Kutupalong Camp. The wildlife sanctuary started with 28,688 acres of forest land. According to the Forest Department, some 800 makeshift shelters have been erected in the sanctuary area, which is not that high a number yet, believes FD. "But the Rohingya who had started exploiting the sanctuary from the very beginning of their arrival are grave concerns for the forest and local communities," says an official.

The destruction of the forest is not just about clearing of trees. The number of plant species and wildlife in and around the camp sites are in danger of being drastically reduced, if not completely wiped out.

According to the office of Cox's Bazar South Forest Division, Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary alone contained 50 percent of all the mammals found in Bangladesh not too long ago, including the rare Malayan tree shrew and eight of the 10 types of primates found in the country: leopard, golden cat, fishing cat, jungle cat, hedgehog, fox, wild boar, monkey, langur, great hornbill, big grey wood peckers, and

Asian elephants. Around 112 different plant species including *garjan* and evergreen trees and other secondary plant species grew in these hilly areas. Around 64 faunal species with high populations of 10 species of mammals, 40 species of birds, 10 species of reptiles and four species of amphibians were recorded in the sanctuary.

Sadly, the population of the elephants in the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, considered genetically viable, has now been separated into two groups—35 to 40 elephants are reportedly trapped in the west side of the Kutupalong camp and an equal number on the east. They cannot meet each other owing to the camps closing down the corridor they use for migration. This may prove fatal for the overall population in the future.

The male elephants may not take it easy and they may lose their temper and get violent, says Professor Monirul H Khan of Jahangirnagar University's zoology department. He is also a wildlife photographer.

"The elephants travel a lot for feeding. The same herd of elephants uses the same corridor for generations," says Khan.

That elephants may lose temper has already been demonstrated. "It happened seven months ago when a big elephant forayed into our house at 12:30 am. We were

**“ We, the villagers used to graze our animals in the forest, fish in the creeks and small lakes, collect firewood and could roam around the area freely. Now without the forest, there is no grazing land for our cows and goats and we have no access to the area. ”**

asleep. The elephant smashed our house. It killed my two children, four-month-old Yasmin Ara and six-year-old Mujibur Rahman. The elephant stepped on my hip and crushed it. I was given primary treatment at Kutupalong Hospital and afterwards, I took treatment at Malumghat Hospital for a month," says Nurjahan, 45, propped against the bamboo walls of her makeshift hut in the Balukhali campsite.

Nurjahan cannot walk normally and cannot go out of her house any longer. When we went to see her on June 15, she could only stand using the bamboo pillars of her hut for support. The camps in Balukhali and Jamtoli areas are close to Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary area.

Nurjahan's two children are among a dozen people killed by elephants.

The corridor for elephants that travel up to Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary from the east has been severely disturbed by the freshly-built Rohingya shelters that currently host a population next to the third largest populated city in Bangladesh. Kutupalong Refugee Camp is not a city but some jokingly refer to it as the fourth largest city of the country.

**A new emergency**